

## **How to Read a Reading of a Written Poem**

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Poetry readings have become a standard element in the practice of poetry in the English-speaking world over the past fifty years, yet their significance as anything more than entertainment remains little understood.<sup>1</sup> Literary studies has lagged behind another field that has made significant steps in the study of poetry performance—oral poetics. My title alludes to John Miles Foley's recent textbook (2002) on the study of oral poetry, which offers both a comprehensive account of different theories of oral poetry and an extended introduction to his own contribution to the study of the units of composition. Foley's work, like that of other ethnographers of oral poetry, has important implications for the study of the relation between any written poetry and its performance, even among the most literate, print-based cultures.

My own research into the contemporary Anglophone poetry reading in which a written, often printed, text is read aloud, began with a puzzle: the seeming dissonance between the opportunities for understanding a poem when read silently and the fleeting impressions presented by an oral performance of the same text. Poetry readings can seem explicable if one thinks of them as entertainment, or part of the celebrity system, or as performances of a verbal score that like most musical scores can only be appreciated properly once converted by instruments and voices into sonic form. All of these variations do take place and important poetry has emerged in each area. Why then is it that such poetry is in the minority, and that the main body of contemporary poetry is also regularly performed by its authors and yet would seem to require the kind of thoughtful, prolonged attention that only silent reading of a printed text can supply?

This question turns out to go much deeper than it would appear. It requires an almost complete rethinking of what we understand as the reading of literary texts in contemporary Western culture. The study of performance

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<sup>1</sup> Recent essays on this topic include Bernstein 1998, Finch 1994, LaBelle and Migone 2001, Lazer 1996, Morris 1997, Robinson 2002, and Vincent and Zweig 1981.

challenges the idea that reading a book is a practice that can be conceptualized as a solitary and autonomous practice, despite the apparent isolation of the silent reader. Although the commonsense image of reading treats it as a cognitive activity taking place in a mental realm that only exists within one subject, just as dreams, thoughts, and memories also occur there, the analysis of oral performance of texts contributes to the hypothesis that literary reading is a collective activity of which the singular encounter with a printed text, and a mind turned inward, is only a small part of a complex network. This collectivity constantly finds different means of representing itself through institutions and rituals: performances in the simple sense, where one or more persons stand in front of an audience, as well as more cutting-edge rituals that are likely to disguise the ritual and performative elements with anything from politics to education, mass media formats, and internet protocols. Orality remains much more important for all forms of modern literature than literary theory and criticism assume.

A contemporary Western poetry reading may seem far from research into texts and readers from earlier periods of history and far from the significance of aesthetically rich language performances in other cultures. There are several reasons, however, why we should not assume that this is the case. One baseline for literary and ethnographic theory is an image of Western literature whose outlines have been shaped by an academic culture of reading largely blind to the degree to which orality and performance remain part of literature today. A revision of the standard picture of texts as objects ready for interpretation is badly needed in spite of the work of historians and theorists of reception into the formation of reception communities and the vicissitudes of reader-response. A second reason is that those few writers, mostly poets, who have investigated the interdependence of writing and orality, have produced bodies of literary work that could, if translated into the more familiar modes of academic conceptualizing, be of considerable value. A third reason is that the textual memory produced by literary texts is spread across networks whose needs are neither understood nor well-supported at present. The significance of specific literary texts for the work of social and individual memory is not in itself neglected. Think of that striking blurb on the cover of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, in which the reviewer says that without this novel there would be a continuing void in American memory. What is not so well understood is the degree to which poetry is a form of emergent social memory that organizes both recollection and forgetting, through performance as much as publication and private reading.

The ordinary poetry reading potentially offers a rich source of research material for the study of how contemporary literary production and

reception work. The lack of self-awareness of the cultural work of the poetry reading among its practitioners means that there is a dearth of documentation and theorizing, but for this reason the structures, values, and effects that tie oral performance of written texts to the wider processes of reading are not venerated over, and are therefore often more accessible to a researcher willing to engage directly with poetry events than they would be if there were a great deal of institutional self-consciousness.

In this paper I offer a schematic outline of the key factors at work in the production of meaning during a contemporary Anglophone poetry reading, in the hope that this will prompt further research, which will, no doubt, both clarify and challenge what I offer here. The principal idea that underlies the following schematic descriptions of the features of the poetry reading is that the contemporary Anglophone poem requires both to be read on the page and to be heard read aloud by the poet, because these poems extend over time and memory to create effects that depend on a mutual interdependence of performance and silent interpretation. Although the usual ordering of composition as a sequence leading from draft writing on the page, to first oral performances, to second and further drafts, and thence to publication, might seem to indicate priority of written text over oral rendition, the relation between written and oral versions of the poem does not necessarily follow this temporal hierarchy. My initial puzzlement arose from a misunderstanding of this principle. Both silent reading and oral performance are incomplete scenes of reception.

**1/ Both the performance of the poem and silent reading of the poem are necessary to experience the poem.**

Some contemporary poetry readings dispense with openly displayed scripts, and require performers to memorize, and improvise, their poems, notably the Slam events discussed by John Foley (2002:3 and *passim*). These events are still atypical; poets at most readings flourish paper. I once saw the old W. H. Auden, recently arrived in Oxford to retire to a cottage at Christchurch College, try to read his poetry from memory and soon stumble over his words to the point where he had irritably to have recourse to a book. This was already eccentric behavior in 1969. Most poetry readings still present poets carrying a sheaf of papers and a few books from which they read aloud work composed in isolation well before the reading. The presence of this text is not a measure of some failure to memorize, nor is it a lack of performative ambition. Anecdotes about poets who write their poems the

day before a reading, or alter their poems during performance are striking mainly because they are deviations from the norm. The poetry reading is a public airing of a written text for approval, communication, and above all oral publication, which will place the poems in a tradition, however local or defined as innovative. Reading aloud from a written text enacts the most basic axiom of this poetry: it is both text and performance at once. It might seem as if there were an invitation to the members of the audience to simulate the performer silently by bringing along a text in order to follow the reading of the poems. This certainly could help with recognition of exactly what words and phrases are uttered, but for most people the division of attention would come at a high price—the loss of many of the nuances of the performer’s soundings and embodiment of the text. Attempts to project poems on the wall run into similar difficulties.

Most contemporary Anglophone poetry is meant to be both read from the page with attention to meaning, spacing, visual appearance, and sonic indeterminacy sharpened by the ease with which one can reread under such conditions, and witnessed in performance. Silent reading of a poem is similar to the practice of a musical score until one can integrate most of its features into an overall experience. A skilled reader who reads a poem he or she has not encountered before—a reader who is both familiar with poetry readings and with the performance styles of the poem’s author—may be able to guess at a possible performance just from the page, much in the manner of an actor or director projecting theatrical performance from a play script. This analogy helps emphasize the importance of the actual reading. Contingency always exceeds anticipation in performance. Directors might doubt whether it were necessary to stage plays if it were possible to anticipate just what would happen when the various elements of a production converged on a particular night. Poems are similar, and the reader of the poem also has to experience the poem’s presentation in a reading if he or she wants to gain a sense of its range of potential.

What is it that only silent reading of the words on the page can achieve for a reader of the poem? Take a poem with an apparently simple construction, Jackie Kay’s “Brendon Gallacher (For My Brother Maxie).” I am reading a version published in an authoritative anthology, *The Penguin Book of Poetry From Britain and Ireland Since 1945* (Armitage and Crawford 1998), where it is the only poem to represent Kay. An introduction to the poem tells me that “Jackie Kay was born in 1961 in Edinburgh, and has lived in Glasgow, London, and Manchester. A playwright and librettist as well as a poet, her adult collections include *The Adoption Papers* (1991) and *Other Lovers* (1993). A collection of poetry for children, *Two’s Company*, was published in 1992” (406). So she is Scottish and has an ear

for lyrics, information that will inform my reading perhaps, but what do I do with the information about Manchester, or her other books? The impression that will inform my reading is that here is a younger poet who is already a high achiever, and someone whose accent may well be a blend of English and Scots pronunciation. The poem is in five stanzas of five lines each, and each line is capitalized, which makes the repetition of some of these opening words, notably the male pronoun “he” repeated five times in the first eight lines, carry great emphasis. Is this poem about a longing for male companionship, or masculine prerogatives perhaps? The stanzas break up the story of an imaginary friend into five chapters. Many lines are end-stopped with a full stop, but several enjambe with a comma, and the effect on my reading is to make me hear a colloquial voice pause for a moment, and then continue, as if the narrative were itself making the point that it will continue further. Musically the verse sounds slightly flat to me, despite the repetition. As I scan down the left-justified margins and notice that the lines are mostly the same length but seem to grow slightly shorter towards the close of the poem, I also notice that there is a great deal of verbal repetition—lots of repetitions of this name, Brendon Gallacher, and lots of “mums,” “dads,” “one days,” and so forth. As a consequence the poem does not have much sense of forward movement, even though it does narrate a story that unfolds across two years. It takes some effort to notice that many lines end in the same rhyme syllable or a variant on it, not least the sound “er”, because some lines do not appear to rhyme in this scheme, such as the lines ending in “poor” and “door.” What catches my interest is the unspoken suggestion that the reasons for the imaginary friend have something to do with her ambivalence towards her father, who is a communist party worker, and I find myself reading across the poem working out the details of this connection.

I have not witnessed Jackie Kay perform the poem, but I have heard her read it aloud on a recording sponsored by the British Council (1998:tape 2, side A, track 4); even that partial transformation occludes several of the features whose effects as meaning I have just described. She begins her reading with a discursive introduction: “Between the ages of five and seven I had this imaginary friend which I called Brendon Gallacher . . . now it’s the word for lie in our family.” When we read the poem in the anthology it might have been a fiction written in the first person. Now the author is testifying that this is a true history of her own childhood, and since this is the first thing she says about the poem we are given a strong message that this authenticity is crucial to how we should listen to it. Kay might have wanted to keep back the information about Brendon Gallacher since the poem

springs his virtuality onto us only near the end. When we read silently we have to go back and rethink our reactions to what we read. Does she tell us the denouement because she knows that as listeners we might mishear the story, a concern that implies that when heard aloud the poem is not quite able to do all the work that it can on the page? She even concludes her introduction by saying, “So this poem’s about Brendon Gallacher just to keep him alive.” The full significance of this intention is only going to be evident to those who have already seen the poem and recall that Brendon Gallacher “dies” in the poem once he meets the test of reality and parental disbelief.

The oral reading also brings out into the open several features that a reading of the page is unlikely to discern. A strong Scots accent and a powerful emphasis on the metrical rhythm combine to give the poem a ballad-like quality. The words “poor” and “door” are diphthongs that fall into the same “er” sound as the other lines. We learn that the lines of the final stanza need to be shorter than the rest of the poem because her voice slows down there to bring out the pathos of the situation. The final line, which felt flat when read on the page,—“Oh Brendon. Oh my Brendon Gallacher”—is infused with grief and longing that is meant to arouse similar feelings in the audience. Pauses are somewhat different in the oral version to those signalled on the page. This is the printed version of lines 8-11 (Armitage and Crawford 1998):

He’d get his mum out of Glasgow when he got older.  
A wee holiday someplace nice. Some place far.  
I’d tell my mum about my Brendon Gallacher

How his mum drank and his daddy was a cat burglar.  
And she’d say, “why not have him round to dinner?”  
No, no, I’d say he’s got big holes in his trousers.

If the spoken version were printed to indicate the breaks in her utterance it would look something like this:

He’d get his mum out of Glasgow when he got older.  
A wee holiday  
someplace nice.

Some place far.

I’d tell my mum about my Brendon Gallacher How his mum drank and his  
daddy was a cat burglar.  
And she’d say,

“why not have him round to dinner?”

No, no, I'd say  
he's got big holes in his trousers.

It turns out that the page layout is not a good guide to the oral sounding of the poem. The lengths of the breath unit vary considerably, there are extended pauses even in the middle of lines, and most surprisingly of all there is a long line created by the rapid run-on from one stanza to the next. This oral structure elicits two responses. New emphases are created that then enhance or diminish the significance of the meaning of certain words and phrases, notably the phrase “some place far.” We hear a dislike of the city of her childhood very strongly here, a dislike that the little girl might be concealing from herself. We also notice that the details about her friend are merged into a long and undifferentiated list when she is in conversation with her mother, because none of this matters to their interaction. A second, more analytic response to this would be to think of the oral atoms of composition. Behind this oral rendition is likely to be a tradition of storytelling in which certain familiar units can be built up into a rhetorically satisfying narrative that affirms intimacy and identity. The phrase “I'd tell my mum” could be followed by a long string of reported speech that would nevertheless be encompassed by the opening report statement.

Although Jackie Kay's poem “Brendon Gallacher” encompasses both the oral performance and the written text, her art is sufficient to make it possible for readers to get by with just one or the other version of it. Only when the two are combined does a reader fully experience the poem as the movement between print and orality brings the poem apparently to life, just like the imaginary boy.

## **2/ The live event is a performance irreducible to any form of recording.**

My analysis of Jackie Kay's oral performance is only a partial account, because it is entirely reliant on a tape made by the British Council. Live events, as I have detailed elsewhere (Middleton 2005:30), are stagings of poetry's temporary ascendancy in environments where other activities usually have primacy. Almost all poetry readings take place in pub rooms, art centers, church halls, classrooms, lecture theaters, theaters, and concert halls, where other arts and other social and institutional priorities have set the terms of the architecture and ordinary use of the space. Many poetry readings can only attract an audience if there are compensations for their

commitment of time to the event: alcohol, perhaps music, and plenty of opportunities for friendly conversation. Many cinemas now show a brief film asking patrons not to make distracting noises; poetry readings are usually awash with them. Poor acoustics, outdoor noise (many of my tapes of London readings are interrupted by sirens, horns, and cries from the street outside), comings and goings of drinkers, coughs due to poor ventilation, encouraging remarks and heckling, lack of proper sight-lines, all make it an extra effort to concentrate on the poetry, and these disturbances can also act on the performer to redouble the problems. Added to this, poets are not usually trained performers able to project and control their voices like actors, and usually do not want to appear too slickly professional. But these imperfections are not really flaws at all. As poetry is vocalized amid this resistance to its command—a drama of poetry's struggle against the conditions of a modernity that does not value poetry much alongside many other arts, especially those of advertising or with enormous commercial potential—listeners and performers enact a momentary triumph together that represents their collective desire for poetry's social promotion to a position of importance.

A poetry reading is therefore first of all a performance of the actual space and its occupants at a particular moment. Performance is the key word here. A poetry reading is a performance, and therefore much of what has been studied and theorized about performance in many arts can be brought to bear on the poetry reading. So can accounts of oral and written poetry in other cultures studied by ethnographers, classicists, and historians. Theories of singing, of theater, and even of popular music may all have insights to offer to the study of the poetry reading. These theories cannot be applied wholesale, however. Their relevance will have to be assessed on the basis of the distinctive qualities of a particular reading, poet, venue, audience, reading series, type of poetry, and other factors. Only on this foundation could we begin to distinguish some general outlines of the contemporary poetry reading.

Such a project will need to take into account a number of key aspects of the performance, including its norms and the diversions from the norm. Most salient of these is the curious fact that until very recently there was virtually no writing about the poetry reading at all, and even now, the few essays that have been written tend to concentrate either on issues of sound, the visionary possibilities of performance (which often has a very high value for proponents of innovative work), or the failings of the typical venue and reader. This silence could be studied ethnomethodologically, showing that the tacit knowledge at work needs to avoid self-reflection in order to be most effective. Too many questions and reflections on the nature of readings

might undermine trust or make too visible some of the limitations or guilty pleasures of the event. But my comment is only speculation. This is a question that remains to be answered. At the very least, the silence about readings suggests that their participants bring to them a range of beliefs, which, like those involved in other rituals, may not withstand too much open examination.

Some aspects of performance—the author's presence as reader, the audience's intersubjective collaboration, voicing, and sound—I shall address in more detail in later sections. A full research program would want to bring the many theorists of performance into dialogue with other aspects, too: the interaction of bodies with each other and the space; other forms of communication such as smell, touch, and gesture; the sharing of emotion among those present; the internal narrative of the event; the importance of the reader's introductions, errors, asides, and even bodily noises; the significance of group histories and allegiances, as well as poetry movements and cliques for the occasion (venues and poets have their fans just like football teams); the need for social contact between poetry-lovers and how the reading plays a part in satisfying that need alongside other types of gathering, ranging from educational courses to entirely social occasions; and those interactions mediated by communication apparatuses.

Poetry readings do not differ from other performances in the degree to which they are not recordable, but their emphasis on sound does make it seem as if not too much is lost if one has a tape recording of some kind, a video recording being even better. It is important to recognize that this accessibility of the event to the future can be just as misleading as films of dance or theater, for instance. Gone is the moment-by-moment responsiveness between audience and performer; gone is the information about the setting that is understood largely subliminally by the audience, and yet provides a backdrop to everything that happens. A more dramatic but still realistic way of saying this is that gone too is much of the element of risk that submitting oneself to a performance entails. One will usually be affected by the event, bodily, emotionally, and intellectually; and it will become a part of who one is, to a degree much greater than any listening to a recording can induce. Other losses of information are very little understood. Very little of the recording of poetry readings is done with the level of audio fidelity used for studio recordings of music since the equipment is designed for speech recording and therefore limited to a fairly shallow frequency range in which most but not all of the sounds produced by the speaking voice are supposedly located. We simply do not know to what degree this compromises some of the finer sonic effects of the vocalisation. Poetry

performers often use a wider range than the ordinary speaker, one closer to that of the singer, and like singers, use fine-grained effects, such as the slight lowering of pitch and volume at the end of the line that Kay uses so emphatically in the recording of “Brendan Gallacher.” The role of hand gestures is likely to be lost in most recordings too. When I recorded the poet Cris Cheek reading a poem in his own kitchen I was surprised that even though this was purely an oral version by a performer known for his full-bodied renditions of texts, he still made occasional hand gestures that were clearly integral to his understanding of how to perform and seemed out of place in the small room.

Recordings are not, however, redundant nor are they merely prompts to memory or clues to lost aspects of performance. Recordings are also part of the repertoire of the poem and, in cases like Jackie Kay’s “Brendon Gallacher,” establish themselves as contributions as important to the reception of the poem as print publication. There are plenty of texts for which a studio recording exists; that recording takes on a third, in-between status of poem, neither written text nor performance. Their relative scarcity may be due to their limitations, both technical (it may be hard to locate a poem on tape—CD tracks are readily located but field equipment for making CD recordings is only just becoming available and is not yet in general use, and MD has a restricted circulation) and as representations of performance; and also due to the costs of production, which until the advent of computer generated CD-Rs made small press productions of recordings too expensive to be viable. Yet there has not been a flood of recordings, even through the internet.<sup>2</sup> This scarcity of recorded material in circulation, like the silence about performance, is itself a further element of the poetry reading that needs to be better understood.

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<sup>2</sup> By the time this article is published an important new venture to make available recordings of poets reading live should be online for researchers and readers of poetry. Penn Sound is Charles Bernstein’s project for the English Department at the University of Pennsylvania. He is creating a website with short downloadable MP3 files of individual poems and, where pertinent, the accompanying paratexts also in their own files; these will represent as wide a range as possible of second-wave modernist poets writing in English. Ubu Web ([www.ubu.com](http://www.ubu.com)) is currently the largest website providing an archive of downloadable sound files of poets reading and performing their texts. We (the Centre for Cultural Poetics at the University of Southampton) have a small archive of UK poets at [www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc](http://www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc).

### **3/ Poetry readings are irreducibly singular and historical.**

Literary theory and scholarship over the past 30 years has repeatedly challenged the reification of literary texts as icons, autonomous units of meaning, material objects, or intentional expressions of an author. Despite this, it is still too easy to think that when we speak of a poem or a novel we are referring to an enduring, stable structure of meaning that corresponds directly with a set of verbal signs contained in a single material form to which we can gain direct sensory access. Poems are particularly prone to this belief in the power of iconic representation. Poetry readings by contrast are more difficult to reify than the readings elicited by printed texts, and this quality may account for their relative neglect by literary scholars.

Silent reading of a text is rarely thought of as a singular act, unless we have read a book at a time that was itself memorable—a holiday, a journey, or perhaps at a time of excitement or trauma. Silent reading is not easily bounded in time either, since we are likely to accumulate acts of attention to the text into a relatively seamless overall memory of it. Live poetry readings are very clearly bounded in time and space. Miss a line and it has gone; there is no rewind. The best that you can do is go to hear the same poet on another occasion read the same poem, except that it is unlikely to emerge quite the same the next time. Poetry readings are also evidently part of a history, which is often made explicit. The reading is part of a wider event, or a memorial to someone, or the occasion of a visit by the poet to that place, and so the reading is part of a sequence of causes and determinations of which participants will to some extent be aware.

When Tom Raworth read his poem *Ace* in a lecture room at Birkbeck College in May 2003 under the auspices of both the SubVoicive poetry reading series organized by Lawrence Upton, and the Centre for Contemporary Poetics directed by Professor Will Rowe, the reading carried with it a history that would have been known to varying degrees by the audience. There were distances within and without the poem. The poem itself was first published in 1974, but most of the copies were accidentally destroyed by a flood in the storeroom where the first print run was being held due to a dispute. The poem was only republished in 1977 by an up-and-coming American poetry publisher, The Figures, which would go on to help establish the careers of a number of avant-garde poets known as the Language Poets. As Tom Orange says, “it’s difficult to imagine what these poems must have looked, read and sounded like in 1974” (2003:161). Each page of the 1977 edition has a single column of very short lines near the middle of the page. At the time of the Birkbeck poetry reading *Ace* had

recently been republished again in the *Collected Poems* from Carcanet Press, a landmark in Raworth's career. In this version the poem has had to undergo an economy, and there are two somewhat longer columns on each page, which changes the appearance of the poem considerably. Although widely known to specialist readers of modern poetry through many small press publications, and widely thought to be one of the major poets of his time, Raworth had, I believe, been published only once by a commercial publisher since the early 1970s (and then in an edition that was quickly pulped). His presence at the Birkbeck Reading therefore celebrated the 2003 publication of his *Collected Poems*, while also lending kudos to the research center there. By combining with the Subvoicive series of poetry readings (first established in 1979), the event could confidently expect to attract a substantial audience. Campus events can be offputting to outsiders, and so considerable effort had been devoted to ensuring that the atmosphere was more pub room than college chamber by providing cups of wine and water and welcoming people with informality. Before the event began, Will Rowe mentioned the half-time break and the chance to smoke outside the building, and Raworth offhandedly said, "You can have a break whenever you want." Most of the audience were known to one another and consequently there was a great deal of greeting and quick conversation before the event started and everyone sat down on the bench seats of the lecture room. One recurrent motif in this chat was the expectation that Raworth would once again demonstrate his impressive ability to read his poetry fast without faltering.

*Ace* was not the first poem to be read, and so by the time we reached it we were becoming familiar with Raworth's rapid delivery and the absence of introduction or commentary. The only introductory words he offered characteristically disowned any direct intent to inform us or make some statement of his own through his choice of poems to read (a choice that is usually a fiercely held prerogative of the poet): "Will sent me a list of things possible to read, so, we'll just start at the beginning and see how far we go." *Ace* begins with a phrase that might be self-reflexive, referring to the new face of the poet standing in front of the audience, asking for a response ("what do you think") (2003:201):

new face  
 from my home  
 what do you think  
 I'll voice out  
 of the news  
 alive and in love  
 drill  
 another hole

near the edge  
 of the label and  
 play it  
 from there  
 with a light  
 pickup  
 bless you brother  
 yours  
 till the energy  
 gaps again  
 let light  
 blink  
 history think

Although the first person pronoun is used from time to time, and later in the poem he even cites what appears to be a self-critical comment (“mister raworth / continues / to believe / every / thing / possible”), the tone of voice is not confiding and does not signal emotionally affirmed sincerity of expression. Raworth speaks with a clear, warm, punctuated delivery that mostly emphasizes the line breaks, but also allows longer units to appear. This delivery is not primarily driven by syntax, narrative, or the shifting demands of the current of emotion as in Kay’s poem. Vocalization resolves ambiguities that are more active on the page: the line “in hail” refers to both bad weather and smoking when seen on the page but heard aloud the meteorology all but disappears in the face of the much more familiar usage. In the following passage Raworth opts for the surprising long “i” in the word “wind,” a decision that has less to do with the immediate meaning of the line and more to do with a running pattern of both long and short “i” sounds associated with words such as: it, in, I, will, life, lives, different, fill, still, hits, wind, riffle, and many others.

each day  
 repeated  
 he lives  
 for ever  
 he thinks  
 alone  
 in the honey  
 comb o  
 the subjunctive  
 that riffle  
 of the deck  
 wind  
 here the surf  
 hits the beach

Reread on that occasion at Birkbeck College by a poet now some twenty-five years older than when he wrote it, and looking a little more rounded and whiter-haired than the man who looks over the shoulder of his wife in a photograph at the back of the second edition of *Ace*, the poem's quick flashes of meditative self-examination become almost nostalgic. How many of us will remember that the word "ace" enjoyed a short life as an expostulation meaning something similar but not quite the same as "cool" means today among the young? And the poem provides its own support for this at some points (2003:220):

voices  
 decay  
 into time  
 of what  
 is it  
 memory  
 writing  
 pattern  
 spelled  
 change  
 unreel  
 twist  
 tone  
 i am  
 again

To hear Raworth read his poem *Ace* on this specific occasion was to hear it as the latest point in a long history of publication, readings, and the career of the poet, as well as to experience the reading as a manifestation of the otherwise largely intangible institutions that had shared organization of the event. References to the Rolling Stones and the Supremes or to computers had a very different resonance. So too did the sight of an elderly, energetic man reading this poem from his past.

**4/ Poetry readings are extremely diverse and this diversity is not necessarily homologous to the types of poetry performed.**

During the past 20 years performance poetry has become much more widespread and visible, and this may encourage the view that different movements in poetry, whether primarily distinguished by formal characteristics, by the shared identity of the poets, or by geographical

proximity, are the main determining factors in shaping the diversity of readings. In practice, however, although the kinds of poetry performed do have some bearing on how the different events are staged, it is only one of several causes at work. When we think of a poetry reading most of us probably think of an event somewhat like the Raworth reading. Keen poetry lovers gather to hear a poet, whose work is already known, present poetry written some time previously and probably already partly published. There are many other kinds of venue and occasion, however, and some acknowledgement of this is needed if we are going to understand what is happening even at a normative event like the Raworth reading. Here are some of the kinds of occasion: memorials for the dead, not only poets, but for anyone, especially younger people (a friend of the deceased, who is not normally a poet, will write and read a poem as an elegy at a memorial event); writing classes, which may also include “open mike” sessions; cabaret, comedy, and other forms of entertainment that include poetry; live or performance art taking place in gallery and other art spaces, which can include text readings; local poetry groups entirely independent of educational institutions where the members read their work and exchange criticism and ideas for publication; political events, ranging from rallies to cultural occasions, organized either by political parties or social movements such as feminism; religious settings in which secular and sacred poems commingle; and ethnic cultural occasions such as the South Asian *mushaira*. The same poem could potentially be read by the author at all of these different occasions, and if it were, its meaning would vary considerably across these sites.

Such observations are familiar enough to anthropologists and scholars of folk and oral poetry, but rarely factored into the study of contemporary poetry. The point I want to make here is not only that ethnographic research can contribute to the study of the poetry reading; it also draws attention to the degree to which the normative reading is itself in need of such analysis. However ordinary the reading occasion, it is deeply embedded in wider social, historical, and cultural matrices. The Raworth reading affirmed Raworth’s significance as a poet in 2003 on the basis of a 30-year publication history, and linked his reputation to the college and the reading series. It also reconnected the poet with friends and admirers who had a chance to link up under the auspices of the event. Despite the apparent informality, the audience members were conscious that they were taking part in an occasion that partook of a long tradition.

Even the normative poetry reading is a loose category within which there is considerable local variation. Raworth avoided introductions, did not

try to give the words dramatic or emotional emphasis, read from a book, and stood in one place reading with one eye on the text and one eye on the audience. Many readings encourage the reader to talk confidently to the audience about the poems they are about to hear, and the poet to read with passion, as if the poems were direct personal utterances of inner thought and feeling. Poets use sheets of paper, projected texts, books, and other forms of prompt. These differences could be summarized as tending to settle into about four sub-categories of the ordinary reading. There is the institutionally organized poetry reading (often at a university or college) that is fairly formal, may well have a stage and a podium, and presents the poet as an authority in the world of poetry whose profile is acknowledged by the status of the event itself. There is the poetry reading series that mainly presents poets whose work is based on a communicative, even conversational, use of language as an expressive medium to an audience who think of themselves as constituting the foundations of the series. Poetry readings organized by many local groups fit this model. There is the more avant-garde poetry reading series where the poet rarely speaks autobiographically and instead presents vocalized artifices of language that might in ordinary discourse be unsayable (the Raworth reading fits this category reasonably well). And then there is the arena like Apples and Snakes in London or the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York where the primary emphasis falls on politically aware entertainment. Political rallies sometimes include poetry, as do religious gatherings, and there is an increasing tendency to include poetry readings in conferences of literary scholars. At the other end of the scale, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that small informal groups of people still read poetry aloud to each other, as was very common less than a century ago before new patterns of entertainment and transport reconfigured leisure practices.

### **5/ The author performs authorship by reading her or his own poetry.**

When Dylan Thomas made his famous tours of America in the early 1950s, he was praised for his ability to bring familiar poems by other poets to life with his splendid voice. Twenty years later when I went to a poetry reading given by Robert Lowell at Oxford University, he was subjected to gestures of dissatisfaction when he announced at the start that he would read poems by contemporaries he admired; Lowell eventually gave way and read his own work. Today it is rare for the poet to read anything but texts composed by the poet. This could strike someone unfamiliar with poetry readings as odd. Why not employ trained speakers and actors to deliver the poetry? And how is it that a poet such as Robert Creeley can read aloud his

poetry as if he were undergoing the anguish that led to the poem's composition, even though he wrote the poem years earlier and was apparently in a good mood a moment ago? Isn't there almost a deception at work when the poet reads a poem with feeling, not dissimilar to the miming of singers and guitarists when they appear on certain television shows or pop videos, or to what Eminem did recently in his stage show by singing along with his own records?

In earlier articles I have set out the arguments for considering the role of the author as playing a key role in the production of poetic meaning in the contemporary poetry reading, and so here I shall only summarize them.<sup>3</sup> Readings provide a chance to see the person of the author in the flesh, and therefore to register all the subliminal cues to character, class, sexuality, and other markers of social and aesthetic status. Hearing the poet's particular choices of pause and intonation, as in the cases of Jackie Kay and Tom Raworth, can also help train readers to be attentive to features of the poetry that they might otherwise miss or misconstrue in their unaided silent reading. More importantly though, poetry readings are opportunities to stage authorship, to explore what it means to be the author of a poem. Whether or not the words uttered are in the form of a personal statement that includes explicitly or implicitly a first-person pronoun, the act of vocalizing the words of the poem lends them a warrant or assertive force. An audience witnesses what it means to say these particular words in public.

Denise Riley is a brilliant reader of her own poetry because she is extremely aware of the implications of communicative interaction with the audience that entails performing her authorship of the poem. The final line of her poem, "*Lure*, 1963"—"And you're not listening to a word I say" (1993:30)—is not primarily addressed to the reader or audience, but still delivers a great punch when she speaks it aloud to an audience. After a richly visual explosion of passionate images of color that are associated with memories of the hopes and imaginings created by the clothes desired by the teenager that she was, the poem turns back on itself, saying, "Oh yes I'm the great pretender." As she reads this and other poems she places this self-exposure between herself and the audience, as if it were a third person there, and talks in and around it. Of course the audience is listening, but it experiences a moment of guilt that it is perhaps not attending as closely as it might, and this emotion can then be folded back into reflections on what it means to try and use clothes, or other kinds of self-display, to win the affections of others.

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<sup>3</sup> See Middleton 1998, 1999, 2002, and 2005. This latter volume contains extensively revised versions of these earlier essays, with some new material.

Riley's poems are subtle explorations of the self as a product of recognition. In an age in which anonymity is an everyday experience, everything from advertising to politics can be a negotiation with, and an invitation to construct, changing identities. *Interpellation* is widely exploited, and the ordinary experience of self is troubled. Poetry readings have consequently become one of the more significant occasions for the aesthetic negotiation of identity.

Identity is also closely bound up with another contemporary issue, authority. Our public spheres are vast, complex networks interdependent with communication technologies, institutions, and power structures that control the authority of the utterances of those who do speak in public. Speech may be free, but plausibility is not. Poets have to compete with a culture of experts whose expertise is legitimated by processes that usually exclude artists. Poets who wish to talk about social or scientific issues are not going to be heard unless they can give their work the glow of authority, and one way to achieve this on a local scale is to do what politicians have always done: appear in person as a plausible, representative spokesperson for the group. A poet lends a certain, admittedly limited, authority to their own poem simply by reading it aloud with conviction at a public event. Poetry readings are a powerful way of lending more cultural capital to poetry as a whole.

## **6/ Voicing depends more on group norms than individual choice.**

Studies of oral poetry show that, as Foley explains (2002:127), the unit of composition is an expanded word, which can be anything from a single word or short phrase to a substantial clump of lines. Just what will constitute the indivisible parts of the poem depends on the local tradition out of which the oral poetics emerges. At first sight these insights would only apply to a small proportion of the poetry read aloud at poetry readings today, such as Slam poetry, which Foley analyzes, or the work of poets such as Jerome Rothenberg, who have been deeply involved in ethnopoetic research. The constraining traditions for most poets are literary histories in which the prosody is first and foremost a guide to writing. Many modern poetry movements have emphasized the importance of vernacular, idiomatic, and above all speech-based writing, but the important point of reference here is ordinary conversation, not the narratives of cultural memory encoded in special phrases and rhythms that demarcate an active oral tradition. As a result, very little research has been done on the influence of styles of oral poetry reading on the compositional practices of poets whose work is largely

defined by its printed form. Scholars take it for granted, I suspect, that there are no reading practices that correspond to the expanded words of the oral tradition. There is, however, if we look more closely at the recent history of poetry readings, reason to suspect that there are some parallels with the oral traditions after all.

There are, to begin with, a small number of reading styles each of which is widely practiced by poets who almost always stick to the one mode. On the Random House Audiobook version of his book, *The Ghost Orchid*, the Northern Irish poet Michael Longley reads in a particularly marked version of the most widespread style of reading poetry in the United Kingdom. In his performance of the following short poem, “Form,” his use of caesurae is particularly evident, and marked here by a backslash (1998:104):

Trying to tell it all to you / and cover everything  
 Is like awakening / from its grassy form, / the hare:  
 In that make-shift shelter / your hand, / then my hand  
 Mislays the hare / and the warmth / it leaves behind.

The listener notices that the pauses are heavily marked by a softening of the voice, which is especially noticeable in the second line. Analyzed as a wave file by computer, graphs of the line show that the amplitudes of the words “awakening,” “form,” and “hare” have a very similar shape: each is gradually attenuated slowly from a decibel level about half that of the mid-phrase volume. Upper frequency speech formants are also either missing or attenuated. This style of reading was not originated by Longley (its origins deserve investigation), and has apparently spread by imitation to the point where almost all poetry that is a form of personal expression, like Longley’s, and is not aiming to be humorous, now employs this technique to some degree. Subjectively the effect is elegiac, a tone of voice that indicates seriousness—emotions of loss, sadness, or regret dominating over others. At its most pronounced it becomes a recurrent “dying fall” of the voice, as it does in this instance from Longley. In common practice it tends to be most heavily used at the ends of lines to reinforce the closure of metrically regular lines.

A second style of reading can be associated with the innovations of poets such as William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley, although it too has multiple origins. These poets treat the written poetic line as a unit of what Olson called “breath,” although this could be misleading if it were taken to mean a pause for breath in the way pauses are used by singers. Line endings are also indications of shifts of thought, instants when

emotion interrupts expression, and through the intake of breath, the bodily presence of the poet. Robert Creeley's reading style is particularly dramatic in its use of the line ending. During an interview with another poet, Charles Bernstein, for a radio program in the United States, which was also issued as a tape recording, Creeley is asked to read the poem "Here" from a collection entitled *Windows* (1991:101).

In other  
words opaque  
disposition intended  
for no one's interest  
or determination  
forgotten ever  
increased but  
inflexible and  
left afterwards.

His voice as he reads lingers on almost every word, sometimes pausing before the next, and usually pausing at the end of the lines, although sometimes he introduces an effect rather like syncopation, and almost runs on. He reads the third and fourth lines so: 'disposition / intended for no one's interest.' As soon as he has finished his voice changes: he speaks fast, saying with amused irony, "like I don't wanna bother anybody so this is a poem which [breathy laugh] will not have, you know this is a poem which will offend no one, will engage no one." Then almost without pausing he reprises the poem completely so that its first three words appear to be a continuation of what he has been saying to the interviewer. This time the poem is read more softly and fluently, with more feeling, and the line breaks emerge as more effective indicators of the feelings and thoughts within the poem's matrix. Comparing the two readings of the poem one has the sense that the first effort was guided more by these internalized rules for marking the line-breaks on the page than by the mood semantics of the text. When Creeley reads the next poem in the interview, "Echo for J. L." (1991:142), his performance is more assured, and the breaks work effectively. Here are the third and concluding stanzas of the poem:

skin. It feels  
itself  
as if a place it  
couldn't

ever get to  
had been at

last  
entered.

The third stanza is enunciated with exceptionally precise attention to the line breaks, so that there are measurable, and potentially disconcerting, pauses after “feels,” “itself,” “it,” and “couldn’t.”

Creeley’s reading style has always been laden with affect, as if the line-breaks were also triggers of emotion. This is distinctive to his performance, but the use of the page layout as a score for the pausing and breathing by the poet reading the poem aloud is widely used, both in the U.S. and the U.K., and is closely associated with the poets whose work is in the modernist or avant-garde traditions. Although Creeley is an extremely skilled reader of his work, his performances occult that skill so that the voice appears naturally expressive, and the sounding of the words is overlaid both cognitively and emotionally by their communicative force.

A third, less common reading style differs in the degree to which the voicing does become a foregrounded element in the performance of the work, even though this is not usually indicated by the page. These poets have often studied voice production, singing, and the avant-garde voicing of such artists as Meredith Monk and Robert Ashley. These poets are also likely to be familiar with the work of “sound poets” such as Emmett Williams, Henri Chopin, and performance groups such as the Canadian ensemble the Four Horsemen. Although a full discussion of this tradition is outside the scope of this essay it is important here to acknowledge that although it is a relatively small number of poets who work at this edge of articulation, they have had and continue to have considerable influence on other styles of performance. This highly developed use of controlled vocal effects represents a continuing investigation of the possibilities and limits of sound, body, and language.

### **7/ Performance implicates the audience on the stage of meaning.**

The audience members for a play or film let themselves imaginatively enter the fictive and diegetic spaces of the staging and screening. Theories of this process of reception usually concentrate on issues of identification, positioning, and cathexis because although the audience is a group of people it can be treated as a collection of identical individuals for most purposes of analysis. The group is usually conceptualized abstractly as a singular collective subject. Some analyses of film reception have recognized that film-goers bring different interests to the screening and are therefore likely

to respond differently according to their age, experience, and their motives for the visit to the cinema, but in contrast to ethnographic work on ritual there has been little interest in the dynamics of the audience itself. Conditions in the cinema and theatre—darkness, the anonymity of the occasion, the discouragement of participation—appear to reduce audience dynamics to a few shared emotions such as laughter, shock, and sadness. Poetry audiences are different. The lights are not dimmed, the audience is aware of its co-presence, and it is commonly made up of people who do know one another and already form a loosely constituted group, however open to newcomers and occasional visitors. At the same time, they are like the audiences for theatre and cinema insofar as their relations with one another are mediated during the performance by the reading itself. Public conversation and debate are discouraged inside the borders of the formal occasion. We need therefore to study the intersubjective dynamics of the poetry reading through analysis of the interaction between the pre-existing internal affiliations of the group and the mediations staged within the imagined spaces created by the vocalized text. We also need to recognize that there will be an underlying tension between the individual responses and this network of intersubjectivity.

To draw even a partial picture of these dynamics is difficult. It requires good recordings, memories, knowledge of the setting and audience, and then analysis of the text itself. I am not sure that we yet have methods to do this adequately. Here I shall take a typically complex occasion and sketch out some of the dimensions of meaning that are generated in one poem as the poet reads. On March 8, 1995, in the early evening after classes, the Durham poet Richard Caddel read a selection of his poems to a university audience at the State University of New York campus at Buffalo. The day before he had given a lecture to graduate students about the poet Basil Bunting, whose work and teaching influenced Caddel's in several ways. The audience, sitting scattered across a large lecture hall, consisted almost entirely of students, with just a few academic staff, almost all of whom were themselves poets. This was, I believe, the first time that Caddel had visited the university, and his work was not known to most of those present. His introduction begins by establishing a link with at least some of those in the audience, and then goes on to make his Englishness a framework for this reading to an audience of Americans. He speaks haltingly with phatic "ums" and emphatic pauses whose effect is to project unrehearsed sincerity. The following is transcribed from a recording of Caddel's poetry reading:

Those of you who heard me talk yesterday will remember me talking  
about border sensitivities quite a lot. And a lot of those concerns will

manifest themselves in the set I'm reading tonight, which is very much to do with situations within the U.K. at the moment over the last few years where value of one kind or other seems pretty damn difficult to maintain. This might be familiar as a situation to some of you. And I fell back as a situation on some of the Celtic civilisations which are around me in the U.K. obviously and some of their imagery and so there are sequences of words taken from the Welsh in what's coming up. But more specifically the image which I want to hang before you before I get going is that of the standing stone Mên Scryfa<sup>4</sup> in Cornwall which is a standing stone with Celtic inscriptions on it which commemorates the names not of the victors of the battle which took place there but of the losers and it's that idea of commemorating the surviving, the loss of the battle that is going on in the set tonight.

Caddel acknowledges that these are mostly students ("those of you who heard me"), and implicitly asks to be heard again from that position. He acknowledges the time of day as a way of pointing to the specifics of the occasion, then encourages his audience to an act of sympathetic imagination (what I experienced in the U.K. is probably something you have experienced here too), and uses an expletive to emphasize the strength of his feeling as well as his Englishness (by employing a particularly British locution—"damn"). He then invites the audience to perform an act of inner visual creation together by thinking of the memorial to the Celtic dead. Finally, he concludes the opening remarks by saying that the idea of such an act of recovering the lost defenders of an ancient culture "is what is going on in the set tonight."

What is it that *is going on* in the poetry reading? This is the question that my entire essay is concerned with, and so what strikes me as fascinating in this paratext is Caddel's willingness to offer such a metalinguistic gesture. We might speculate that performers do this more often than we realize, and this might be a rewarding avenue of research. Caddel's wish to offer cultural anamnesis has to contend with some strong counter-forces, most obviously the cultural divide, coupled with the lack of knowledge of Celtic culture, let alone the obelisk. Who in the audience is likely to be able to perform the feat of visualization? Perhaps this opening offers a line to hang onto in the face of confusion or at least the struggle to form a coherent intersubjective response. Before performing one of his most significant poems, "Rigmarole: Block Quilt" (2002:118), Caddel prefaces it by saying that he will not repeat

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<sup>4</sup> The tape is not entirely clear at this point, but I am guessing that this is the stone that Richard Caddel had in mind. It is a memorial to a king killed in the sixth-century Battle of Gendhal Moor.

what he is about to utter, so the audience must listen closely. This introduction to his reading of the poem fine-tunes his already established relation to the student audience: “The block quilt is again a method of maintaining fragments which would otherwise have been lost and as the alcohol starts to bite more and more into the memory bank in my case the act of memory becomes more and more important, and ‘Rigmarole: Block Quilt’ is a poem about maintaining fragments of memory in one sense or another.” What happens then as the poem is read?

From the beginning the poem provides other images that may hang in front of the audience: “scrape the vellum,” “patchwork concerns,” “scrape the record,” “the song come down to us,” “lost songs,” or “a fine concern for pattern.” The seventh stanza says, “we greet ourselves / from our separate thoughts,” and in the context of this public reading invites the audience to recognize its internal distances as opportunities for acts of recognition. Caddel’s introduction has already helped make this point more salient than it might have been. In the final three stanzas of this eighteen-stanza poem, the audience members are further encouraged to think of themselves as finding and hearing forgotten fragments of lyric poem and making a collage with them. Each stanza of the printed poem is set out in phrasal clusters with an extended caesural spacing between them and no punctuation. Caddel reads fluently, in marked contrast to his halting style of presentation, and he sometimes reads across a line-break as if it were not there, although on the whole he belongs to the school of poetry readers who do observe the line break. The printed text leaves a word-length space to indicate a substantial caesura (2002:121):

finally and unasked-for      caring’s not dead  
written on the margins of sleep      speedwell  
stitchwort, gentian      a distillation  
eyes open and so much to learn from them

it’s what remains      when the slate is wiped  
just wanted to say      I love you  
and all of this too      pieces laid side by side  
for clarity      no easy way

of breath      no wasted effort  
the songs finding themselves      curled asleep  
miles away      escapers in tender  
common range of visible things

If one reads this text as spoken to and through the dynamics of that particular audience, one notices that the listeners are represented as not

having asked for affirmation that “caring’s not dead.” The audience has its eyes and egos open and recognizes that it has much to learn, not least about Celtic civilization and this English poet. The phrase “just wanted to say” is one of those almost phatic remarks that acknowledges an awkwardness of address, and here resonates as an example of a past intent to speak, a wanting, that is now perhaps being fulfilled. The songs and the listeners find themselves present among “the common range of visible things”—the poem seems to end with an invitation to wake up from its verbal spell to the mundane environment of lecture hall and evening in March. This audience finds itself in a back-and-forth shifting relation to the speaker, who enacts a drama in which his words may be at one instant in danger of being ignored (“unasked-for”) and at another longed for (“eyes open and so much to learn from them”). And there are many other momentary as well as extended dramas of inclusion for the listeners in a poem that is different from the norm only in its excellence.

## **Conclusion**

Time has changed that poetry reading of Richard Caddel’s in a manner that I have not yet mentioned. His death in April 2003 pushes the material of the recording and memories of witnessing it into an elegiac frame, and thence into a history whose agent is no longer active. This raises a question that my essay has not tried to answer, addressed as it is to potential scholars of this history of performance and poetry. What possible value does this investigation have for poets themselves?

I would like to think that a fuller understanding of the poetry reading would lead neither to self-consciousness nor a striving for greater dominance of the situation but to the improvement of the conditions under which audiences engage with poetry and the better understanding of the many ways in which meaning is produced. A performance situation provides further materials for the poem’s facture, just as page, language, contemporary discourses, and the book, all provide the palette for written composition. Learning what these are could help benefit the neophyte poet, and there is some evidence that this is now happening, that more and more poets are going to performance workshops. A better understanding of the relations between poetry on the page and poetry in performance will also enable us to historicize this interdependence and grasp how it has been changing over the past century. There is some evidence that boundaries between text and performance are becoming more permeable and that what we have called

poetry is gradually changing to encompass wider and wider ranges of performance, including installation art, conceptual work, and musical performance. The full significance of these developments is only likely to emerge from more historical study.

When a written poem is read aloud, positions for identification and interpretation open up within the semantic space that are available to both individuals and the group. The performance occasion works as a model of civic or public space, which is then like a back projection for the occasion of the reading and these intra-textual stagings. By contrast, the mere standing forth of the Xhosa praise poet, the *imiboshi*, is as important as the content of his political poetry, because the salience of his role is a reminder of the possibility of alternatives to the policy and even reality set by the chief. A poetry reading is a much less powerful version of this, yet this bearing of public witness remains a potent element within the performance occasion. I was recently among ten poets reading in Winchester Cathedral in the North Transept. The airy acoustics that swallowed poets' voices in receding echoes was one of many reminders that our reading, which included both secular and religious poems, was in tension—or perhaps dialogue would be a preferred metaphor—with the building's embodiment of a Christian mission. This unusual venue for a reading was a small sign that poets, readers, and critics of poetry are becoming more conscious of the possibilities and cultural work of poetry performances. Research is still in its infancy in this area, and the questions we ask will need to take account of the issues set out above, and no doubt of many others that still need identifying.

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